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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000331

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR CA/OCS/ACS T. MENDEL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ASEC](#) [KJUS](#) [KCRM](#) [SNAR](#) [CASC](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN POLICE CHIEF DEFENDS POLICE ACTIONS

REF: A. YEREVAN 306
[1](#)B. YEREVAN 322

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Classified By: Ambassador Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4(b,d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) On May 8 Armenia's Chief of Police, Major General Alik Sargsian, assured the Ambassador that the police would do all they can to ensure that the upcoming Yerevan municipal election is free and fair. Sargsian vowed the police would exercise impartiality and restraint in the face of provocations by opposition forces. Given the history of police repression against the opposition, however, and their failure to prevent or resolve attacks on journalists and opposition supporters, we view these promises skeptically. Sargsian also promised to pursue the case of a missing Amcit, and expressed interest in USG law enforcement assistance programs. End summary and comment.

ELECTION A CHANCE FOR POLICE TO WIN PUBLIC TRUST

[1](#)2. (C) The Ambassador called on Sargsian to review law enforcement and human rights issues and to urge Sargsian to help ensure that the May 31 Yerevan municipal election is free and fair. She noted that painful memories linger in the public mind surrounding the 2008 presidential election and the tragic post-election violence that left ten dead. The upcoming election, the Ambassador said, is a chance for the police to turn the page on those events, but recent actions by the police have not been helpful. She cited the police obstructing the opposition's nightly gatherings on Northern Avenue, and the failure to make arrests in the growing number of assaults on journalists. Acknowledging that the police are in a difficult position and that the opposition is not always blameless, the Ambassador nonetheless stressed that the right of the opposition to assemble and express themselves should be respected, including the right to rally in centrally-located areas of Yerevan. She urged Sargsian to increase the transparency of police operations, for instance by allowing observers into the police control room during the election, as has been done in other countries.

[1](#)3. (C) Sargsian insisted there had been no case of police beating opposition campaigners. The son of the editor of an opposition paper, he said, had tried to provoke police and then had feigned an injury. Sargsian also denied numerous media reports that police on May 1 had erected roadblocks on the approaches to Yerevan in order to prevent opposition supporters from attending a rally by opposition

leader Levon Ter-Petrosian (ref A). He said police had blocked attempted "marches" on Northern Avenue because the "marchers" had not been sanctioned by Yerevan municipal authorities and Northern Avenue residents and businesses had complained about marchers using aggressive tactics and blocking the street. He alleged that some in the opposition "equated democracy with anarchy." (Note: Armenian law does not require permits for spontaneous events of fewer than 100 people. Sargsian claimed the "marches" drew more crowds of more than 100, and that their nightly occurrence showed that they were not spontaneous. End note.)

¶4. (C) Sargsian acknowledged the problem of assaults on journalists, and said police are doing all they can to solve these cases, and have in fact solved one, but added that they are often well-planned attacks and tough cases to crack. He commented that in one case a reporter had tried to make a minor scuffle sound like a serious assault. (Comment: Police investigations into the latest two attacks (reftels) have created a stir because both investigations were launched under an article of the criminal code that deals with assaults causing "bodily injury of medium severity." In the first brutal attack, the assailants allegedly fired three shots at the journalist but missed. A wooden baton was also found at the scene. The journalist ended up in intensive care with severe injuries. The second attacked journalist also required treatment at a hospital. End comment.)

CRIME MAY BE UP, BUT THE PUBLIC STILL SUPPORTS US

¶5. (C) Touting the transparency of the police, Sargsian cited the new public advisory council to the police and public awareness efforts by the police on TV and the

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Internet. He said public support for the police has increased as people see that now even the rich and well-connected are being held accountable under the law. He invited the Ambassador to take a walk with him through a neighborhood of her choosing where, he said, she would witness citizens coming up to him to compliment him on the improvement in law and order.

¶6. (C) Sargsian remarked that crime in Armenia in the first four months of 2009 had risen 57 percent over the same period in 2008. He said part of this increase was due to improved reporting of crimes, but the numbers also reflected the impact of the economic downturn on the population. Police are doing all they can, he said, and are especially targeting "latent crimes" such as drug trafficking, illegal weapons, corruption and abuse of power, opening four times as many of these cases compared with the previous year. (Comment: We think Sargsian intended these comments to pre-empt accusations that recent police crackdowns -- such as the national campaign against illegal guns that was vividly on display on May 1, the day of LTP's rally -- were a pretext for the police to harass or intimidate the opposition. End comment.)

MISSING AMERICAN CITIZEN

¶7. (SBU) The Ambassador raised the case of a missing American citizen, which is being investigated as a possible murder. Sargsian was familiar with the details of the case, and assured the Ambassador that police were making every effort to find the missing man.

POLICE EXPRESS INTEREST IN USG ASSISTANCE

¶8. (C) Recently the police have been only superficially responsive to USG offers of assistance to improve the professionalism and effectiveness of Armenian Police units. In this meeting, Sargsian sounded enthusiastic about such programs, and noted that his forces were already

cooperating with police from California in a number of areas. (Note: It was not clear whether he was referring to state or local law enforcement in California. End note.) In a subsequent meeting, Sargsian's Chief of Staff seemed genuinely interested, and requested an opportunity to discuss the types of assistance the Embassy could offer.

YOVANOVITCH